

Loving the City

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning and welcome again to Advent. If you have been with us the past few weeks, you know that we have been in the book of Jonah in the month of July.

And for any reason you haven't been with us, if this is your first time or you have been out of town, Jonah is a story of a minor prophet in the Old Testament. It's this short but great story about a prophet who runs away from God, but who nonetheless has this incredibly deep encounter with God's mercy and His grace and His power by being rescued literally from the bottom of the sea. And this experience of, this deep experience of God's grace and His power takes Jonah on both an inward journey and on an outward journey. And that's what we've been looking at. Last week in chapter 3, we saw the first part of Jonah's outward journey, this process of how God changes Jonah's perspective toward Nineveh, a group of people who are His ethnic and national enemies. And part of what we said last week is that this is the journey that we all have to go on as followers of Jesus, of learning how to love our enemies and even learning how to love our neighbors and even our enemies, even people that we would consider those kinds of people.

And before we dive into chapter 4 this week, I want to make good on a promise that I made in week 1, which is that I would say a brief word about the historicity of Jonah.

[1 : 32] We just didn't have time to fit that in the past couple weeks, but a question that I raised that some of you might have or that some of your friends might have as we read a story like Jonah is, did this story actually happen?

Should we consider it to be historically true, or is it just a symbolic story? A lot of people would argue that it's just an allegory or a parable, that it's a fictional story mostly because of its style. It's crafted like an allegory. It's crafted to teach a lesson. And there's also some miraculous events that happen in chapter 2 with the great fish, in chapter 4 with the vine that we just read.

And so in many ways, on a surface value, on face value, when you read a story like this, it seems like it might just be a fictional story, an allegory. That's not necessarily historically true.

What do we say to that? Well, we can say a couple things. I think we can say a few things. The first is that many scholars agree that the primary genre of Jonah is, even though it has features of an allegory, the primary genre is not an allegory, but a prophetic narrative.

[2 : 43] You can think about prophetic narratives like the stories of Elisha and Elijah in the book of Kings, that even though they have maybe perhaps a miraculous or sensational component, they nonetheless would have been received by the original audience as being historically true because they are about prophets, both receiving and preaching God's word to his people.

The second thing that we can say is that we know from the book of 2 Kings that Jonah was a prophet under the time of Israel, under King Jeroboam II.

And if we consider the book of 2 Kings to be a work of history, and if it mentions the prophet Jonah, then we should probably consider Jonah to be historically true as well.

And then the final thing that we can say is that in Matthew chapter 12, which has been in our gospel reading the past several weeks, Jesus refers to the story of Jonah in reference to his own death and his own resurrection.

And because we take Jesus' own death and resurrection as historically true, then it makes sense for us to also do that for Jonah. And so in summary, kind of what we can say is that even though stylistically it has some literary features of an allegory, that we should still take Jonah to be at face value, to be a story that really happened.

[4 : 02] And so if you have questions about that or if you want to talk more about it after the service, I'd be glad to talk about that with you. In our final look at this story in chapter 4 that we arrive at this morning, we're going to look at the second part of the outward journey that Jonah goes

on.

And we're going to look at this in two parts. We're going to look at Jonah's concern for the vine and God's compassion for the city. Jonah's concern for the vine and God's compassion for the city. I think we might have some elementary schoolers here with us this morning. If you're in elementary school, raise your hand. Where are they? There may be some elementary schoolers here. You should have, like the past few weeks, received some colored pencils and paper on your way in. And on the third page, there should be a space for you to draw a picture. And so I'm going to give you a picture to draw during the sermon. So today, if you would like to draw a picture, I want you to draw a picture of a city.

It could be our city, Washington, D.C., or it could be another city that you visited, or it could be a city that you make up. That you draw yourself. And then I want you to draw around that city.

[5 : 12] I want you to draw a picture of God loving that city. I want you to draw a picture of God loving that city. All right? And as always, I want to see, if you end up drawing that, I want to see it after the service.

So come and show it to me. So we're going to look at Jonah's concern for the vine, God's compassion for the city. First of all, Jonah's concern for the vine. Last week, what we looked at in chapter 3 is that after Jonah repents, I'm sorry, after Nineveh repents from the word that Jonah preaches to them, and God relents from bringing judgment on the city, Jonah becomes angry. And he becomes so angry that he doesn't want to live. And we saw there's great irony in this. The irony is that Jonah is totally fine being on the receiving end of God's mercy and compassion, but he does not want to live in a world where the Lord shows that very same mercy and compassion to his enemies.

And that's where we pick it up, where we pick up the story in chapter 4, verse 5. And verse 5 says this, Jonah went out of the city to the east and made a booth for himself there.

He sat under it in the shade till he should see what would become of the city. This word for booth means some sort of makeshift shelter, perhaps made out of stones or clay or sticks or whatever he could find.

[6 : 32] And so he's sort of sitting out in the wilderness under this makeshift shelter, kind of still holding out hope, still holding out hope that perhaps God is still going to destroy Nineveh in judgment.

Maybe he is going to send down fire from the sky. Maybe he's going to send an invading army to come and conquer them. But he's sitting out there to the east of the city in his little makeshift shelter, and he's sitting there in the heat of the day with the sun beaming down on him, an experience we can all relate to this time of year.

And his makeshift shelter is giving him a tiny bit of shade, but it's not quite enough. Have you ever had the experience where you have just a little bit of shade, but you're still pretty uncomfortable? It's not enough shade?

I think that's what was going on. And so he's sweating. He's getting pretty hot. You know, he's a little bit uncomfortable. He forgot his SPF 50 sunscreen back in Israel. He did not bring his Ray-Ban sunglasses.

He's getting a little sunburn. You know, that's the situation. But then we read in verse 6, Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head to save him from his discomfort.

[7 : 45] We don't know precisely what kind of plant this was, but it was probably some sort of large vine with large leaves that provided shade from the sun and more shade than Jonah was currently having.

And verse 6 tells us that Jonah was exceedingly glad about the vine. He was exceedingly glad about it. But the plant, the story tells us, doesn't last very long.

The Lord then sends a worm to attack the plant and then a scorching east wind that causes the plant to wither and die. And Jonah then becomes angry and moves into despair once again.

And talk about an emotional rollercoaster. Like Jonah is on this emotional rollercoaster in chapters 3 and 4. In just a short time, we've gone from depths of anger and despair about God having mercy on Nineveh, his enemies, and then to the mountaintop of joy because now there's this plant that's providing him shade back down again to the depths of anger and despair.

And the Lord asks him a question again. And the Lord says to Jonah, Jonah, you mean to tell me that you are more concerned about this vine that provided you with a little bit of shade for less than 24 hours, that you did nothing to labor for, you did nothing to make it grow?

[9 : 06] Jonah, you are more concerned about this vine than you are about human beings in the city of Nineveh. And Jonah's rollercoaster of emotions shows us that his perspective on Nineveh has moved from irony to absurdity.

It's moved from irony to absurdity. He cares more about this vine that's giving him a little bit of shade than about 120,000 people who are made in the image of God.

And here we see another idol, another functional savior at work in Jonah's heart. In chapter 3, we saw the idol of tribalism, his ethnocentrism, putting his own love for his country and his culture at the center of his life.

And here in chapter 4, we see a new idol pop up, and it's the idol of comfort. It's the idol of comfort. Now, comfort isn't a bad thing. I love the thermostat to be at the exact right temperature in my house, in my car.

You can ask my roommates, and they would tell you that. But when our love of comfort becomes greater than our love for God, and when it becomes greater than our love for our neighbors, it becomes an idol.

[10 : 21] It becomes a functional savior. And the reason why that is important is because it becomes an idol that actually keeps us from participating in the mission of God in the world, from participating in the mission of loving our neighbors and sharing the gospel with the world.

Jonah failed to see that the reconciliation of the people of Nineveh to their creator would have been a much greater joy than the small joy of just a little bit of shade that a plant could provide.

And I think if we're honest, I think we are all like Jonah in this regard in some ways. And I think we're all like Jonah in some ways like this because I think that our love of comfort can keep us from experiencing the joy of participating in God's mission in the world.

I think we have to admit that in a time, in a place, in a culture like ours, it is so easy to center our lives around comfort. And I'm speaking to myself here as well.

We can so center our lives around finances or career stability or on our family stability or just the simple conveniences of modern life, which are all good things.

[11 : 33] They're all good gifts from God. But we can so center our lives around those comforts in such a way that we insulate ourselves, that we insulate ourselves from our neighbors.

We insulate ourselves from people who don't know Christ. We insulate ourselves from the poor, from the marginalized, from the people who are suffering. And we insulate ourselves with comfort in a way that we miss out on the beauty and the glory of participating in God's mission in the world.

But part of what God is trying to teach Jonah here is that the small joys of comfort that we insulate ourselves with pale in comparison to the joy of joining God and what he's doing in the world.

And I was reminded of this recently as I was watching a new Netflix series called Quarterback. I don't know if you have seen this. If not, you should. But this documentary is produced by Peyton Manning in NFL Films.

And it follows three quarterbacks through last year's NFL season. It follows Marcus Mariota from the Atlanta Falcons, Kirk Cousins from the Minnesota Vikings, and Patrick Mahomes from the Kansas City Chiefs.

[12 : 44] And it follows them on and off the field throughout the whole season. So it shows footage from their practices and games. But it also shows footage from their time with their families at home, with their wives and kids.

And if you're not familiar with NFL at all, if you're not familiar with the NFL season last year, it's important to know that in the postseason playoffs, Patrick Mahomes suffered a pretty significant ankle injury towards the end of the season.

And if you follow the playoffs in the end of the season, you know that this was a big part of the drama of the latter rounds of the playoffs, particularly the AFC Championship and the Super Bowl. Is Patrick Mahomes going to be healthy enough to play?

And the documentary shows kind of an up-close look at Patrick Mahomes dealing with his injury. It shows him on game day fighting through it and playing through it and kind of just groaning after every throw and after every play, even just hobbling and walking around while he's playing, not really being able to fully run.

And it's clear that he's in a lot of pain, but he's fighting through it because he wants to play and because he wants to play in the Super Bowl.

[13:57] There's even a scene that shows him during the week receiving treatment from his athletic trainers that even intensifies the pain because it shows his athletic trainers pushing on the nerves and the bone.

It's kind of a hard scene to watch. But what's striking to me is the amount of pain Patrick Mahomes was able to tolerate because of how badly he wanted to compete and win.

And there's a scene after the AFC Championship where he says, you know, part of how I get through it is I just have to tell myself that it doesn't hurt, which is like an incredible amount of mental toughness.

Patrick Mahomes put up with an incredible amount of pain and comfort. Why? Because he was compelled by the glory and by the joy of the mission of winning the Super Bowl.

And for him, the comfort of his ankle was this incredibly small joy. It was insignificant compared with a much more glorious joy of getting that Lombardi Trophy, which he did end up getting.

[15:00] And I'm sure that if we asked him today, he would say that all the pain and discomfort that he experienced was worth all the glory and all the joy of the mission. God was inviting Jonah, and through Jonah, he was inviting Israel into a mission greater than winning Super Bowls.

It was the mission of joining him in his redemptive and reconciling and restorative work in the world, to see all the nations of the earth come to know his salvation and his steadfast love and mercy and grace, to be a community that participates in what God is doing to restore all creation, to be a community that embodies the shalom, the holistic flourishing of God's kingdom in such a way that Israel's neighbors would say to them, who is the God that you worship?

Who is the God that you worship that you would be a group of people that lives such lives of love and justice and mercy and compassion and holiness?

Who is the God that you worship that you would love the foreigner and the vulnerable and the marginalized among you in this way? And friends, that is also the glory of the mission that we get to participate in as well, although under expanded ways under Jesus Christ.

And it's a mission that is worth giving up all kinds of comfort for and to even be willing to embrace discomfort, to even be willing to embrace suffering, to be inconvenienced for the sake of others.

[16:32] And so if we're going to go on the outward journey of joining God and his mission in the world, then we're all going to have to face the idol of comfort. We're all going to have to embrace the pain and the discomfort of what God, of being joining what God is doing.

Maybe it's the difficulty, as we looked at last week, of learning how to love those people, those people that we don't want to associate with.

Maybe it's the discomfort of being generous with our time and money. Maybe it's the awkwardness of talking to our friends and coworkers about the gospel. But whatever it is, joining God in his mission and what he is doing in the world forces us to face our idol of comfort and to deal with it.

So how do we do it? How do we face the idol of comfort? Well, we have to see God's compassion for the city. God's compassion for the city.

And that's what we see next here in chapter 4. In chapter 4, verse 11, which is the last line of the whole story, God asked Jonah this question.

[17:41] He says, And I love that this story ends on this question for a lot of reasons.

I love that it ends on this question because I think it shows us something profound about God and it also invites us to respond to this story in a way that changes our own lives.

Three times throughout the story, God refers to Nineveh as that great city. It was great in both its size and its influence. 120,000 people may not be a lot in our world, but it was a lot of people in the ancient world.

It was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. And so it was a political, economic, and cultural urban center. And this is something that God acknowledges. And it's actually central to why he calls Jonah there.

He says, There's 120,000 people who are made in my image, who reflect my goodness and my glory. And it is that density of image bearing that moves God's heart with compassion for Nineveh.

[18:53] But it's more than just the size and the influence that moves his heart for compassion. Did you also notice that what he said was that the city is full of people who don't know their right hand from their left?

This is a saying that's referring to their moral and their spiritual lostness. Their sin and evil and injustice has so corrupted their society that they can't even discern good from evil, right from wrong anymore.

They don't know which way is up, which way is down. They're without a compass. They're lost in their lostness. And this isn't something that brings about God's disdain.

It's something that awakens his compassion. It's something that awakens his mercy. It's something that awakens his love. Their lostness. But one more thing. Look at what he ends on.

He ends the last words of the whole story. The last words of this question are, and much cattle. And much cattle. What a weird way to end the story.

[19 : 56] What's that about? What is the much cattle about? Well, if you think about it, cattle were a huge part of the economy of that city in the ancient world. They were a huge part of their agriculture.

They were an important part of the fabric of the society that impacted people's daily lives. Their jobs. Their businesses.

Their families. Their livelihoods. And it's here that we see that God is concerned about all the individual people, but he's also concerned about the whole city. God is not only concerned about the city's spiritual renewal, but he's concerned for its social and cultural renewal as well.

God's heart is overflowing with compassion for the whole city. For the people who are made in his image and for the institutions that impact the lives of his people.

The businesses. The schools. The transportation. The public safety. The legal systems. The arts. And this is the heart of God that moves us with compassion and love towards our own city and towards the great cities of the world.

[21 : 03] And I actually think that this is a really important point for us to see here. Because at this point in human history today, more people are living in cities than at any other point in human history.

At the beginning of the 19th century, about 5% of the world's population lived in cities. But by the beginning of the 20th century, that grew to about 14%. And today, it's over 50%.

And estimates are that trend is well up to 75% to 80% by the year 2050. The future of the world is an increasingly urban one.

And this is something that secular people and religious people, people who believe in God and people who don't believe in God, can have in common. It's something they should care about. That if we care about the future of our world, we should care about cities.

Even if we don't live in cities, we should care about them because our world is going to be an increasingly urban world. But we should especially care about cities if we're Christians. Not because cities matter more than other places.

[22 : 09] Of course not. Absolutely not. But because people are moving into cities faster than the churches. It's not that churches and ministries in urban areas matter more than those in the suburbs or rural areas.

Absolutely not. But what it does mean is that if redemption is about the restoration of the image of God in all people, then cities like Nineveh and cities like Washington, D.C. have an important role to play in that story.

Because wherever people are, the image of God is. And the image of God is more densely concentrated in cities than any other place.

And what we see from Jonah chapter 4 is that that reality is something that moves God's heart.

That reality is something that moves God's heart with compassion and mercy and love. Every city in the world, including ours, needs people who reflect the merciful, compassionate heart of God that we see here in Jonah chapter 4.

Who don't just come to the city to use the city for their own gain. And just enjoy what the city has to give to them. To build a career, to make more money, to just enjoy the cool restaurants and the museums and the art galleries and the concert venues.

[23 : 27] But who come to the city to give to the city. To serve the city, to invest in the city. Perhaps even at their own expense. Perhaps even at their own discomfort.

Why? Because they're moved with God's compassion. And they're moved by the glory of a greater mission. To seek the spiritual renewal and the cultural renewal of the city.

To see men, women, and children come to know the love of Christ and the power of the gospel in their lives. To see neighborhoods and communities transformed. To see workplaces and institutions

flourish and become more just and humane.

To see the poor and the marginalized be loved and dignified and empowered. And this is a beautiful mission. But it's not a comfortable mission.

It's not an easy mission. It's not a risk-free mission. But the most glorious and the most joyful things are always worth giving up comfort and ease.

[24 : 28] If you want to experience the glory of winning a Super Bowl. You are going to have to experience some bumps and bruises along the way. If you want to experience the glory and the beauty of the view of a mountaintop peak.

You're going to have to face some pain and discomfort on the hike up. And I think this is part of where the story of Jonah leaves us.

I think one of the questions that we're left with at the end of the story of Jonah is this. Given God's great heart of mercy and compassion.

Given his great heart of mercy and compassion for the lost. For all nations of the earth. For even people that we would consider our enemies.

For our own city and all the great cities of the world. Given his heart of mercy and compassion.

What comforts are we willing to leave behind?

[25 : 34] What discomforts are we willing to embrace? In order to join God in the more glorious joy of his mission. And I actually think this is an important question.

As we consider a move to the Shaw neighborhood. In the urban core of our city. I think it's going to be an amazing opportunity. But I also think it's going to involve facing some discomfort.

And I think we have to think about that. Are we going to make decisions as a church. Because we want to experience more comfort. Or are we going to make decisions because we want to more greatly participate in the mission that God is doing.

What comforts is God calling you to leave behind? Maybe it's the discomfort of talking to friends and coworkers about the gospel. And sharing your story of how Christ has made a difference in your life.

Maybe it's facing the discomfort of how learning to love. Learning how to love those people. People that you otherwise would want to avoid. What dreams might he be asking you to let die?

[26 : 43] So that you can experience the joy of a greater mission. Maybe it's making more money. Maybe it's having more status and power. Maybe it's buying a bigger house.

But whatever it is. God's question here at the end of Jonah doesn't leave us where we are when we started it. I think it should lead us to wrestle with the status quo of our lives. It should force us to confront the idols of tribalism and comfort in our own hearts.

And it should lead us into deeper love for our neighbors and our city and even our enemies. And it should drive us deeper into the heart of God and to his mission in the world to seek and to save the lost.

And that is what Jesus came for. What is the story of Jonah about? Well, as we've seen over the past four weeks, it's about a lot of things.

But mostly it's about Jesus. Jesus is the prophet and the missionary that Jonah should have been. Jonah disobeyed God's word and ran away from him.

[27 : 45] But Jesus Christ fully obeyed God's word and perfectly fulfilled the law in our place.

Jonah threw himself into the storm to save the sailors on the ship. But Jesus threw himself into the storm of God's judgment to save us.

Jonah was angry about the city because he hated his enemies. But Jesus wept over the city because he loved people who hated him. Jonah went outside the city and waited for it to be destroyed.

But Jesus Christ went outside the city to suffer and die for it so that it could be saved. Jonah clung to the comfort of the vine. But Jesus Christ abandoned the comfort and the glory of heaven to come to earth and experience pain and suffering and death.

Why? Hebrews chapter 12 tells us that for the joy set before him, he endured the cross. And what was the joy set before Jesus?

It was you. It was me. It was you. It was me. It was all the nations of the earth. It's all the people in our city. For Jesus, all the pain and the suffering was worth the joy of seeing all the nations of the earth come to know him and be reconciled to himself and love.

[29 : 08] And when you see that, when you see Jesus Christ abandoning comfort for you and enduring the suffering of the cross, you'll leave behind any comfort.

You'll abandon any dream to follow him. Let's pray together. Almighty God, thank you for this story in your word.

And thank you for how it teaches us about your glory and your grace and your love and your compassion. Lord, I pray that as we reflect on this amazing story, Lord, I pray that it would drive us deeper into your heart and that it would drive us deeper into love for our neighbors and for your world.

Lord, and we pray this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.